

Chapter XXIII

Martin And His Partner Take Possession Of Their Estate. The Joyful Occasion Involves Some Further Account Of Eden

There happened to be on board the steamboat several gentlemen passengers, of the same stamp as Martin's New York friend Mr Bevan; and in their society he was cheerful and happy. They released him as well as they could from the intellectual entanglements of Mrs Hominy; and exhibited, in all they said and did, so much good sense and high feeling, that he could not like them too well. 'If this were a republic of Intellect and Worth,' he said, 'instead of vapouring and jobbing, they would not want the levers to keep it in motion.'

'Having good tools, and using bad ones,' returned Mr Tapley, 'would look as if they was rather a poor sort of carpenters, sir, wouldn't it?'

Martin nodded. 'As if their work were infinitely above their powers and purpose, Mark; and they botched it in consequence.'

'The best on it is,' said Mark, 'that when they do happen to make a decent stroke; such as better workmen, with no such opportunities, make every day of their lives and think nothing of - they begin to sing out so surprising loud. Take notice of my words, sir. If ever the defaulting part of this here country pays its debts - along of finding that not paying 'em won't do in a commercial point of view, you see, and is inconvenient in its consequences - they'll take such a shine out of it, and make such bragging speeches, that a man might suppose no borrowed money had ever been paid afore, since the world was first begun. That's the way they gammon each other, sir. Bless you, I know 'em. Take notice of my words, now!'

'You seem to be growing profoundly sagacious!' cried Martin, laughing.

'Whether that is,' thought Mark, 'because I'm a day's journey nearer Eden, and am brightening up afore I die, I can't say. P'rhaps by the time I get there I shall have growed into a prophet.'

He gave no utterance to these sentiments; but the excessive joviality they inspired within him, and the merriment they brought upon his shining face, were quite enough for Martin. Although he might sometimes profess to make light of his partner's inexhaustible cheerfulness, and might sometimes, as in the case of Zephaniah Scadder, find him too jocose a commentator, he was always sensible of the effect of his example in rousing him to hopefulness and courage. Whether he were in the humour to profit by it, mattered not a jot. It was contagious, and he could not choose but be affected.

At first they parted with some of their passengers once or twice a day, and took in others to replace them. But by degrees, the towns upon their route became more thinly scattered; and for many hours together they would see no other habitations than the huts of the wood-cutters, where the vessel stopped for fuel. Sky, wood, and water all the livelong day; and heat that blistered everything it touched.

On they toiled through great solitudes, where the trees upon the banks grew thick and close; and floatad in the stream; and held up shrivelled arms from out the river's depths; and slid down from the margin of the land, half growing, half decaying, in the miry water. On through the weary day and melancholy night; beneath the burning sun, and in the mist and vapour of the evening; on, until return appeared impossible, and restoration to their home a miserable dream.

They had now but few people on board, and these few were as flat, as dull, and stagnant, as the vegetation that oppressed their eyes. No sound of cheerfulness or hope was heard; no pleasant talk beguiled the tardy time; no little group made common cause against the full depression of the scene. But that, at certain periods, they swallowed food together from a common trough, it might have been old Charon's boat, conveying melancholy shades to judgment.

At length they drew near New Thermopylae; where, that same evening, Mrs Hominy would disembark. A gleam of comfort sunk into Martin's bosom when she told him this. Mark needed none; but he was not displeased.

It was almost night when they came alongside the landing-place. A steep bank with an hotel like a barn on the top of it; a wooden store or two; and a few scattered sheds.

'You sleep here to-night, and go on in the morning, I suppose, ma'am?' said Martin.

'Where should I go on to?' cried the mother of the modern Gracchi.

'To New Thermopylae.'

'My! ain't I there?' said Mrs Hominy.

Martin looked for it all round the darkening panorama; but he couldn't see it, and was obliged to say so.

'Why that's it!' cried Mrs Hominy, pointing to the sheds just mentioned.

'THAT!' exclaimed Martin.

'Ah! that; and work it which way you will, it whips Eden,' said Mrs Hominy, nodding her head with great expression.

The married Miss Hominy, who had come on board with her husband, gave to this statement her most unqualified support, as did that gentleman also. Martin gratefully declined their invitation to regale himself at their house during the half hour of the vessel's stay; and having escorted Mrs Hominy and the red pocket-handkerchief (which was still on active service) safely across the gangway, returned in a thoughtful mood to watch the emigrants as they removed their goods ashore.

Mark, as he stood beside him, glanced in his face from time to time; anxious to discover what effect this dialogue had had upon him, and not unwilling that his hopes should be dashed before they reached their destination, so that the blow he feared might be broken in its fall. But saving that he sometimes looked up quickly at the poor erections on the hill, he gave him no clue to what was passing in his mind, until they were again upon their way.

'Mark,' he said then, 'are there really none but ourselves on board this boat who are bound for Eden?'

'None at all, sir. Most of 'em, as you know, have stopped short; and the few that are left are going further on. What matters that! More room there for us, sir.'

'Oh, to be sure!' said Martin. 'But I was thinking - ' and there he paused.

'Yes, sir?' observed Mark.

'How odd it was that the people should have arranged to try their fortune at a wretched hole like that, for instance, when there is such a much better, and such a very different kind of place, near at hand, as one may say.'

He spoke in a tone so very different from his usual confidence, and with such an obvious dread of Mark's reply, that the good-natured fellow was full of pity.

'Why, you know, sir,' said Mark, as gently as he could by any means insinuate the observation, 'we must guard against being too sanguine. There's no occasion for it, either, because we're determined to make the best of everything, after we know the worst of it. Ain't we, sir?'

Martin looked at him, but answered not a word.

'Even Eden, you know, ain't all built,' said Mark.

'In the name of Heaven, man,' cried Martin angrily, 'don't talk of Eden in the same breath with that place. Are you mad? There - God forgive me! - don't think harshly of me for my temper!'

After that, he turned away, and walked to and fro upon the deck full two hours. Nor did he speak again, except to say 'Good night,' until next day; nor even then upon this subject, but on other topics quite foreign to the purpose.

As they proceeded further on their track, and came more and more towards their journey's end, the monotonous desolation of the scene increased to that degree, that for any redeeming feature it presented to their eyes, they might have entered, in the body, on the grim domains of Giant Despair. A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burnt them up; where fatal maladies, seeking whom they might infect, came forth at night in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water, hunted them like spectres until day; where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved.

At last they stopped. At Eden too. The waters of the Deluge might have left it but a week before; so choked with slime and matted growth was the hideous swamp which bore that name.

There being no depth of water close in shore, they landed from the vessel's boat, with all their goods beside them. There were a few log-houses visible among the dark trees; the best, a cow-shed or a rude stable; but for the wharves, the market-place, the public buildings -

'Here comes an Edener,' said Mark. 'He'll get us help to carry these things up. Keep a good heart, sir. Hallo there!'

The man advanced toward them through the thickening gloom, very slowly; leaning on a stick. As he drew nearer, they observed that he was pale and worn, and that his anxious eyes were deeply sunken in his head. His dress of homespun blue hung about him in rags; his feet and head were bare. He sat down on a stump half-way, and beckoned them to come to him. When they complied, he put his hand upon his side as if in pain, and while he fetched his breath stared at them, wondering.

'Strangers!' he exclaimed, as soon as he could speak.

'The very same,' said Mark. 'How are you, sir?'

'I've had the fever very bad,' he answered faintly. 'I haven't stood upright these many weeks. Those are your notions I see,' pointing to their property.

'Yes, sir,' said Mark, 'they are. You couldn't recommend us some one as would lend a hand to help carry 'em up to the - to the town, could you, sir?'

'My eldest son would do it if he could,' replied the man; 'but today he has his chill upon him, and is lying wrapped up in the blankets. My youngest died last week.'

'I'm sorry for it, governor, with all my heart,' said Mark, shaking him by the hand. 'Don't mind us. Come along with me, and I'll give you an arm back. The goods is safe enough, sir' - to Martin - 'there ain't many people about, to make away with 'em. What a comfort that is!'

'No,' cried the man. 'You must look for such folk here,' knocking his stick upon the ground, 'or yonder in the bush, towards the north. We've buried most of 'em. The rest have gone away. Them that we have here, don't come out at night.'

'The night air ain't quite wholesome, I suppose?' said Mark.

'It's deadly poison,' was the settler's answer.

Mark showed no more uneasiness than if it had been commended to him as ambrosia; but he gave the man his arm, and as they went along explained to him the nature of their purchase, and inquired where it lay. Close to his own log-house, he said; so close that he had used their dwelling as a store-house for some corn; they must excuse it that night, but he would endeavour to get it taken out upon the morrow. He then gave them to understand, as an additional scrap of local chit-chat, that he had buried the last proprietor with his own hands; a piece of information which Mark also received without the least abatement of his equanimity.

In a word, he conducted them to a miserable cabin, rudely constructed of the trunks of trees; the door of which had either fallen down or been carried away long ago; and which was consequently open to the wild landscape and the dark night. Saving for the little store he had mentioned, it was perfectly bare of all furniture; but they had left a chest upon the landing-place, and he gave them a rude torch in lieu of candle. This latter acquisition Mark planted in the

earth, and then declaring that the mansion 'looked quite comfortable,' hurried Martin off again to help bring up the chest. And all the way to the landing-place and back, Mark talked incessantly; as if he would infuse into his partner's breast some faint belief that they had arrived under the most auspicious and cheerful of all imaginable circumstances.

But many a man who would have stood within a home dismantled, strong in his passion and design of vengeance, has had the firmness of his nature conquered by the razing of an air-built castle. When the log-hut received them for the second time, Martin laid down upon the ground, and wept aloud.

'Lord love you, sir!' cried Mr Tapley, in great terror; 'Don't do that! Don't do that, sir! Anything but that! It never helped man, woman, or child, over the lowest fence yet, sir, and it never will. Besides its being of no use to you, it's worse than of no use to me, for the least sound of it will knock me flat down. I can't stand up agin it, sir. Anything but that!'

There is no doubt he spoke the truth, for the extraordinary alarm with which he looked at Martin as he paused upon his knees before the chest, in the act of unlocking it, to say these words, sufficiently confirmed him.

'I ask your forgiveness a thousand times, my dear fellow,' said Martin. 'I couldn't have helped it, if death had been the penalty.'

'Ask my forgiveness!' said Mark, with his accustomed cheerfulness, as he proceeded to unpack the chest. 'The head partner a-asking forgiveness of Co., eh? There must be something wrong in the firm when that happens. I must have the books inspected and the accounts gone over immediate. Here we are. Everything in its proper place. Here's the salt pork. Here's the biscuit. Here's the whiskey. Uncommon good it smells too. Here's the tin pot. This tin pot's a small fortun' in itself! Here's the blankets. Here's the axe. Who says we ain't got a first-rate fit out? I feel as if I was a cadet gone out to Indy, and my noble father was chairman of the Board of Directors. Now, when I've got some water from the stream afore the door and mixed the grog,' cried Mark, running out to suit the action to the word, 'there's a supper ready, comprising every delicacy of the season. Here we are, sir, all complete. For what we are going to receive, et cetera. Lord bless you, sir, it's very like a gipsy party!'

It was impossible not to take heart, in the company of such a man as this. Martin sat upon the ground beside the box; took out his knife; and ate and drank sturdily.

'Now you see,' said Mark, when they had made a hearty meal; 'with your knife and mine, I sticks this blanket right afore the door. Or where, in a state of high civilization, the door would be. And very neat it looks. Then I stops the aperture below, by putting the chest agin it. And very neat THAT looks. Then there's your blanket, sir. Then here's mine. And what's to hinder our passing a good night?'

For all his light-hearted speaking, it was long before he slept himself. He wrapped his blanket round him, put the axe ready to his hand, and lay across the threshold of the door; too anxious and too watchful to close his eyes. The novelty of their dreary situation, the dread of some rapacious animal or human enemy, the terrible uncertainty of their means of subsistence, the apprehension of death, the immense distance and the hosts of obstacles between themselves and England, were fruitful sources of disquiet in the deep silence of the night. Though Martin would have had him think otherwise, Mark felt that he was waking also, and a prey to the same reflections. This was almost worse than all, for if he began to brood over their miseries instead of trying to make head against them there could be little doubt that such a state of mind would powerfully assist the influence of the pestilent climate. Never had the light of day been half so welcome to his eyes, as when awaking from a fitful doze, Mark saw it shining through the blanket in the doorway.

He stole out gently, for his companion was sleeping now; and having refreshed himself by washing in the river, where it snowed before the door, took a rough survey of the settlement. There were not above a score of cabins in the whole; half of these appeared untenanted; all were rotten and decayed. The most tottering, abject, and forlorn among them was called, with great propriety, the Bank, and National Credit Office. It had some feeble props about it, but was settling deep down in the mud, past all recovery.

Here and there an effort had been made to clear the land, and something like a field had been marked out, where, among the stumps and ashes of burnt trees, a scanty crop of Indian corn was growing. In some quarters, a snake or zigzag fence had been begun, but in no instance had it been completed; and the felled logs, half hidden in the soil, lay mouldering away. Three or four meagre dogs, wasted and vexed with hunger; some long-legged pigs, wandering away into the woods in search of food; some children, nearly naked, gazing at him from the huts; were all the living things he saw. A fetid vapour, hot and sickening as the breath of an oven, rose up from the earth, and hung on everything around; and as his foot-prints sunk into the marshy ground, a black ooze started forth to blot them out.

Their own land was mere forest. The trees had grown so thick and close that they shouldered one another out of their places, and the

weakest, forced into shapes of strange distortion, languished like cripples. The best were stunted, from the pressure and the want of room; and high about the stems of all grew long rank grass, dank weeds, and frowsy underwood; not divisible into their separate kinds, but tangled all together in a heap; a jungle deep and dark, with neither earth nor water at its roots, but putrid matter, formed of the pulpy offal of the two, and of their own corruption.

He went down to the landing-place where they had left their goods last night; and there he found some half-dozen men - wan and forlorn to look at, but ready enough to assist - who helped him to carry them to the log-house. They shook their heads in speaking of the settlement, and had no comfort to give him. Those who had the means of going away had all deserted it. They who were left had lost their wives, their children, friends, or brothers there, and suffered much themselves. Most of them were ill then; none were the men they had been once. They frankly offered their assistance and advice, and, leaving him for that time, went sadly off upon their several tasks.

Martin was by this time stirring; but he had greatly changed, even in one night. He was very pale and languid; he spoke of pains and weakness in his limbs, and complained that his sight was dim, and his voice feeble. Increasing in his own briskness as the prospect grew more and more dismal, Mark brought away a door from one of the deserted houses, and fitted it to their own habitation; then went back again for a rude bench he had observed, with which he presently returned in triumph; and having put this piece of furniture outside the house, arranged the notable tin pot and other such movables upon it, that it might represent a dresser or a sideboard. Greatly satisfied with this arrangement, he next rolled their cask of flour into the house and set it up on end in one corner, where it served for a side-table. No better dining-table could be required than the chest, which he solemnly devoted to that useful service thenceforth. Their blankets, clothes, and the like, he hung on pegs and nails. And lastly, he brought forth a great placard (which Martin in the exultation of his heart had prepared with his own hands at the National Hotel) bearing the inscription, CHUZZLEWIT & CO., ARCHITECTS AND SURVEYORS, which he displayed upon the most conspicuous part of the premises, with as much gravity as if the thriving city of Eden had a real existence, and they expected to be overwhelmed with business.

'These here tools,' said Mark, bringing forward Martin's case of instruments and sticking the compasses upright in a stump before the door, 'shall be set out in the open air to show that we come provided. And now, if any gentleman wants a house built, he'd better give his orders, afore we're other ways bespoke.'

Considering the intense heat of the weather, this was not a bad morning's work; but without pausing for a moment, though he was streaming at every pore, Mark vanished into the house again, and presently reappeared with a hatchet; intent on performing some impossibilities with that implement.

'Here's ugly old tree in the way, sir,' he observed, 'which'll be all the better down. We can build the oven in the afternoon. There never was such a handy spot for clay as Eden is. That's convenient, anyhow.'

But Martin gave him no answer. He had sat the whole time with his head upon his hands, gazing at the current as it rolled swiftly by; thinking, perhaps, how fast it moved towards the open sea, the high road to the home he never would behold again.

Not even the vigorous strokes which Mark dealt at the tree awoke him from his mournful meditation. Finding all his endeavours to rouse him of no use, Mark stopped in his work and came towards him.

'Don't give in, sir,' said Mr Tapley.

'Oh, Mark,' returned his friend, 'what have I done in all my life that has deserved this heavy fate?'

'Why, sir,' returned Mark, 'for the matter of that, everybody as is here might say the same thing; many of 'em with better reason p'raps than you or me. Hold up, sir. Do something. Couldn't you ease your mind, now, don't you think, by making some personal obserwations in a letter to Scadder?'

'No,' said Martin, shaking his head sorrowfully: 'I am past that.'

'But if you're past that already,' returned Mark, 'you must be ill, and ought to be attended to.'

'Don't mind me,' said Martin. 'Do the best you can for yourself. You'll soon have only yourself to consider. And then God speed you home, and forgive me for bringing you here! I am destined to die in this place. I felt it the instant I set foot upon the shore. Sleeping or waking, Mark, I dreamed it all last night.'

'I said you must be ill,' returned Mark, tenderly, 'and now I'm sure of it. A touch of fever and ague caught on these rivers, I dare say; but bless you, THAT'S nothing. It's only a seasoning, and we must all be seasoned, one way or another. That's religion that is, you know,' said Mark.

He only sighed and shook his head.

'Wait half a minute,' said Mark cheerily, 'till I run up to one of our neighbours and ask what's best to be took, and borrow a little of it to give you; and to-morrow you'll find yourself as strong as ever again. I won't be gone a minute. Don't give in while I'm away, whatever you do!'

Throwing down his hatchet, he sped away immediately, but stopped when he had got a little distance, and looked back; then hurried on again.

'Now, Mr Tapley,' said Mark, giving himself a tremendous blow in the chest by way of reviver, 'just you attend to what I've got to say. Things is looking about as bad as they CAN look, young man. You'll not have such another opportunity for showing your jolly disposition, my fine fellow, as long as you live. And therefore, Tapley, Now's your time to come out strong; or Never!'